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ABSTRACT

More adults are attending college in Finland, so that now approximately one-third of university students, including one-fourth of undergraduates are aged 30 years or over. A study using national data and adult history accounts found these three reasons connected with the change of the age structure in universities: studying for a second university degree; long study times; and starting studies at an adult age. A common attribute of the adults interviewed was that they had to work at a young age, but, especially at transition points in their lives, acted on long-standing desires for more education. They also felt that they were "different" from university students of usual ages, mostly because of their multiple life roles as parent, employee, and spouse. Surprisingly, the adult students also reported feeling "different" at work and kept their studies quiet in that environment because they perceived lack of support or even hostility to their studies. All the adults reported positive impacts of their studies, whether or not they gained employment advancement. However, almost all of the adult students did report positive employment results. (Contains 31 references.) (KC)

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# WAS IT WORTH IT?
# Graduating from the university at adult age

**A paper presented at ESREA 2001: Wider Benefits of Learning: Understanding and Monitoring the Consequences of Adult Learning**
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## 1 INTRODUCTION

In many countries the age structure of university students has changed to such an extent that adult students who before were an anomaly in higher education now form a significant proportion of students (e.g. Graham & Donaldson 1999; Brandell 1998). In the 1980s, a concept of *adultification of higher education* (*e.g.* Abrahamsson, 1984) was brought into educational discourse, but in the 1990s the change in the university student body was described with a new concept, *the adult university* (Bourgeois *et. al.*, 1998). In this article a two-phased study on the adultification of university students in Finland[1] is introduced.

The general theoretical frame of the study is the idea of increasing individuality and reflexivity in late modern societies (e.g. Beck 1994, 13-16; Giddens 1991). It has been argued that in late modernity the phases of life course are reshaped and contain new meanings. The life course of an individual is not tied to the 'normal biography' or 'script of life' to such an extent as before, and there is now more individual variation. The research is situated in the development of Finnish learning society where educational policies aim to raise the educational level of the population and call for active citizenship and individual responsibility about one's life (e.g. Ministry of Education 1997a). Studying in the university at adult age can be thought to represent the culture of individualism, a situation where lifelong learning and learning society are manifested as individual pressure to gain more education. Rinne and Salmi (1998, 169) have expressed this idea as follows: *"just as people are 'doomed to individualise', they are also 'doomed to learn' and educate themselves throughout their lives"*. Tight (1999) has identified a number of myths about adult/continuing/lifelong education, and one of the myths is the belief that adults are 'volunteers' of learning. Today, as Tight stresses in a form of a counter-myth, adults' engagement in formal

[1] In Finland, there is a binary system of higher education with 20 universities and 29 polytechnics. My research focuses on university students only.



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learning is becoming a compulsory activity. According to Hake (1999), lifelong learning becomes the necessary condition for survival in late modernity.

Statistical data from existing registers were used to gain an overall picture about the age structure of students in different fields of education and in different universities (Moore 2000a). The data on individual students aged 30+ made it possible to analyse the life course of adult students and describe the differing study patterns of Finnish university students (Moore 2000b). In the second phase of the study, a life history approach was used to gain insight on the process and the meaning of university education when the university degree is studied at adult age. The adults' accounts of their lives produce information about experiences as adult students and university graduates, about individualised life courses, about changes in lives due to higher educational level and about personal, social and economic returns of participating in formal higher education. Based on the data it is possible to understand how the ideas of lifelong learning and learning society are manifested in 'real life'.

## 2 ADULT STUDENTS IN FINNISH UNIVERSITIES

### 2.1 Adultification of university students

In the first phase of the study statistical data provided by Statistics Finland were used to gain information on the phenomena involved in the change of the age structure of university students (Moore 2000a). The statistical data were firstly tables of the ages of Finnish university students in 1996 by university, study field and sex, and secondly, an 80 percent sample of students aged 30+ (the number of students in the sample being 32 000) with 15 different variables on each student. The variables include information besides on present studies (level, faculty) and demographic factors (marital status, number of children) also previous education and childhood background. The socio-demographic factors from the time when these students were 9-13 years old include the geographical area of living, the size of the place of living, father's occupation and father's educational level.

In Finland, no special position exists for mature students: adult students study in the same degree programs as the 'regular' or 'ordinary' younger students; neither is there any categorisation into part-time and full-time students. In table 1, the changes in the number and in the age structure of university students during the last 30 years are presented. The number of students in universities has tripled, and at the same time the age structure of students has changed dramatically. The proportion of students aged under 25 has fallen from 71 percent to 41 percent, and the proportion

of students aged 30+ has increased so that now one third of university students in Finland are aged 30 years or over.

**Table 1.** The age structure of Finnish university students (%) in 1967-2000. (SVT XXXVII:1, 124-125; SVT XXXVII:5, 56-57; Statistics Finland 1976; SVT XXXVII:10, 48; Statistics Finland 2001, 32)

| Year | Age -19 | Age 20-24 | Age 25-29 | Age 30- | Total % (n) |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| *¤)1967 | 8.7 | 62.1 | 24.0 | 5.1 | 100 (n=45 324) |
| ¤) 1970 | 6.2 | 58.9 | 28.5 | 6.4 | 100 (n=57 180) |
| #) 1975 | 5.8 | 49.7 | 32.3 | 12.2 | 100 (n=75 765) |
| #) 1980 | 5.4 | 45.4 | 30.7 | 18.5 | 100 (n=84 176) |
| x) 1985 | 4.5 | 44.8 | 29.2 | 21.5 | 100 (n=92 230) |
| x) 1990 | 4.0 | 41.0 | 28.5 | 26.4 | 100 (n=112 921) |
| x) 1995 | 4.1 | 37.0 | 28.6 | 30.4 | 100 (n=133 359) |
| #) 2000 | 3.9 | 36.6 | 25.8 | **33.7** | 100 (n=157 796) |

This table is a combination of different kinds of data: *) the first year statistics were produced, in 1967 spring term, ¤) based on year of birth, #) classified tables, x) table data, age of student at the end of the year

The figures in table 1 include both undergraduate and post-graduate students. The change in the age structure can be thought, at least partly, to be due to the increase in post-graduate studies. In 2000, 15 percent of all university students were on the post-graduate level and most of them, 80 percent, were aged 30+ even if it has been an objective in educational policy to lower the age of new doctors (Ministry of Education 1997b)[2]. Table 2 shows the development in the age structure of undergraduate students in the last 15 years. Unfortunately, from the previous statistics it is not possible to separate students on different study levels.

**Table 2**. The age structure of Finnish undergraduate students (%) in 1985-1999 (Moore 2000a; Statistics Finland 2001, 32).

| Year | Age -19 | Age 20-24 | Age 25-29 | Age 30- | Total % (n) |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1985 | 4,9 | 48,4 | 29,4 | 17,3 | 100 (n=84 823) |
| 1990 | 4,7 | 47,4 | 28,2 | 18,7 | 100 (n=97 146) |
| 1995 | 4,7 | 42,8 | 29,7 | 22,8 | 100 (n=114 916) |
| 2000 | 4.6 | 43.0 | 26.9 | **25.4** | 100 (n=133 511) |

[2] The average age of taking a master's degree is 27.3 years, the average age of taking a doctoral degree is 36 years (Statistics Finland 2001, 30).

It can be seen that the age structure of undergraduate students has changed as well, and now one quarter of undergraduate students are aged 30 years or older. Students aged under 25, who generally are referred to when we talk about university students, now actually form less than half of all undergraduate students.

The student age structure is not the same in all fields of study or in all universities. In natural sciences, technical science and medicine there are only few adult students. The proportion of 30+ students is highest in nursing science where 76 percent of undergraduate students are in this age group. In theology and social sciences, one third of students belong to this age group. Adults study less in universities of technology and business than younger students do.

**2.2 Different study patterns of adult university students**

Tables 1 and 2 show the adultification of Finnish university students. Now, one quarter of undergraduate students are aged 30+, which indicates that something has changed in the actual study patterns as well. As mentioned, no special position for a mature student exists in Finnish universities, and when planning the data for the study, only the age criterion of 30 years was used to separate 'adults' from 'ordinary' students. When 30+ undergraduate students are classified according to the time of study, previous education and age of entrance, they can be seen in different study positions indicating different study patterns. Three different features connected with the change of the age structure were found: studying for a second university degree, long study times and starting studies at adult age.

*Long study times and overlapping university degrees*

On one hand, long study times have been seen as a typical feature of Finnish universities (e.g. Hermunen 1989) and on the other, a serious problem of (the productivity of) higher education. Prolongation of university studies has created wide public discussion about the inefficiency of Finnish universities. According to the recommendations set by the Ministry of Education (1996), the length of studies for a master's degree should not exceed 5 years[3].

The study times of students aged 30+ are long: only less than one third has studied less than five years. Long study times are partly due to procedures that are used to register study times. The year the student accepts the study place is regarded as the year the studies began not depending

[3] It should be noted that 96 percent of all university students study for the master's degree including a thesis. The remaining 4% aim for the bachelor degree.

on how much time the student actually uses in studies. In long study times, two different patterns can be separated, prolonged studies and returning to studies after, sometimes a very long period of time. Separating the latter kind of study position clarifies one structural feature of Finnish university: once gained, the right to study in a university is a lifelong right and it is possible to return to one's studies at will. In 1996, 43 percent of 30+ students had been registered as students for 10 years or more. Another feature in the adultification of undergraduate students is that 14 percent of 30+ students are those who already have at least one previous university degree. This kind of study pattern creates a new dimension to university studies, one university degree gained at young age does not exclude the possibility of starting studies again in another study field later in life.

*Entering university at adult age*

In defining a group of students who *entered studies at adult age* the aim was to locate a group of students who begin their studies at a non-traditional age. The criterion was set to be entering the university for the first time at the age of 30 years or older - clearly later than the mainstream of students[4]. Those who enter university at adult age differ from 'ordinary' students or other adult students in many ways. First of all, there are more women than men starting studies at adult age, a result similar to those found in British studies (Johnston & Bailey 1984; Blaxter, Todd & Tight 1996). The choice of study field does not seem to be as wide for these adult students as it is for younger students (cf. Guyot 1997). For example, it is very rare to start studies at adult age in medicine, natural science, pharmacy or sport sciences. The choice of studies is different for men and women: women study mainly nursing science and education. Men start studies at adult age mainly in social sciences and education, but there is also a special route for adult men into technical studies.

In Finland, *numerus clausus* is used in accepting students to universities. Before, taking the matriculation examination was a criterion to be able to apply for a study place (+ an entrance examination). Since the 1980s it has been possible to enter university without the matriculation examination if the applicant has a vocational degree and passes the entrance examination. Students who start their studies at adult age have significantly fewer matriculation examinations than young, 'ordinary' students or any other student group: 24 percent of them (37 percent of men and 18 percent of women) have not matriculated. Instead, these adults have completed a lot of previous studies at lower educational levels and only 15 percent of them come to university without

[4] The definition (of the age) of a non-traditional student varies in different countries. In Sweden, non-traditional university students are those who fill at least one of the following criteria: after basic education there has been at least one long break in studying, the student comes to university at the age of 25 or later, or the studying is part-time (Petri 1999). In a study about adult access policies and practices in EU (Frenay et al. 2000) non-traditional adults were those who came to university at the age of 25 or later (in Britain 23+) and who did not have previous HE degree.

previous vocational education. These adult students typically have one or two vocational degrees at the time they begin university studies, but 20 percent of them have three or more degrees. These figures refer to the results of many studies in the field of adult education: accumulation of education.

The group of students who start their studies at adult age fill many of the criteria previously used to describe non-traditional or 'second chance' students (e.g. Davies 1995). They come to university significantly later than the mainstream students and they come from families with a lower socioeconomic status than any other student group. Typically, when these students were 9-13 years old their fathers were workers or farmers, the fathers had only the basic level of education and the family lived in small towns or in the countryside outside southern Finland.

## 3 STUDYING AT ADULT AGE

### 3.1 From statistics to interviews

In the second phase of the study the focus is on adults who have studied their master's degree clearly at a later age than the mainstream of students. Life history approach is used to gain insights of the process of education and the changes that take place on the individual level. In order to be able to analyse the meaning, the effects and the significance of gaining a university degree at adult age, I chose to interview individuals who have completed their studies. Snowball sampling was used to find this kind of university graduates, and 21 adults, 15 women and 6 men were interviewed. Based on the statistical data it is known that the majority of these adult graduates have experienced both intergenerational and intragenerational social (upward) mobility (or work-life mobility, see e.g. Butler & Savage 1995). These adults' accounts of their lives - formal education being in the center of the life history interviews - produce information about the interviewees' experiences both as adult students and university graduates. By using life histories the aim is to understand the social meanings and experiences of mobility, and the complexity of processes, which underlie it (Bertaux & Thompson 1997, 2). The interviewees were asked to tell freely about their educational paths, the interviews lasted from 1,5 to 3 hours, were recorded and later transcribed.

The interview data have been analysed on different levels. I see the educational life stories representing something between the actual life, what happened, and how it is seen and told from the point of view of today. On the life history level, the educational pathways are analysed and connected to time and place, to the structural context of individual's education. The data have been

analysed from another point of view as well: when telling about themselves as former students and 'older' university graduates the interviewees' stories are seen to represent shared cultural ideas about the university, university degree and age. In this way the individual life stories *"are not isolated, individual affairs but reflect and constitute the dialectics of power relations and competing truths within the wider society"* (Bron & West 2000, 160).

### 3.2 Educational pathways of adult university graduates

The educational pathways of adult university graduates are individual and there is no general pattern found in the timing of higher education in life or in the way these adults have used educational opportunities. In their childhood the educational possibilities were limited due to structural, financial or geographical reasons and the possibility of going to university just did not exist or it was not relevant at that time. Many educational paths were very short in the beginning, lasting only 6-7 years.

> *At that time there was no grammar school in the municipality (male civil engineer)*
>
> *It was economic* (reason)*, I really wanted to go* (to grammar school) *but I had no choice (male, PhD in education)*
>
> *My teacher came to my home more than once to talk with my parents, that I should be sent to grammar school, but my father said that no, we can't afford it and I have to work at home, elementary school is enough and that was it then. (female economist)*
>
> *He phoned me that this would be like a real permanent job. So I started. I was 16. (female nurse educator)*

A common feature is that the interviewees had been in working life from very young age, all except two interviewees had previous vocational education before entering the university, and there is hardly any experienced unemployment. While working in their 'first occupation' they started to look for new possibilities, but the motivation to apply and to start studies in university developed slowly. Many of the interviewees started studying again at adult age in the night classes aiming for the matriculation examination or they took some courses in the open university. For the interviewed the motivation to enter university at adult age is not related to a transition in other areas of life like unemployment or divorce. Instead, for most of these adults the motivation to start studying again and apply to university studies is 'under-loading'. They were not completely satisfied with their work or their predicted future in that occupation. They felt they could do more or they would enjoy doing something more demanding.

> *But maybe some reason for these studies, studies in upper secondary school* (evening classes) *was that I had been so long in that same place and somehow it didn't give me*

*enough meaning, it was like, that there* ***has to be*** *something else in this life, like this is not enough (female lawyer, former secretary)*

*It was a real disappointment that whole work then, I thought this can't be true that this is these same things all the time, I was so bored with it (...) and then the bosses started to change many times, and when I had been there many years so it was so stupid under the subordination of such a boss who didn't know like anything about that work and you knew more yourself (female planning officer, former secretary)*

*The job wasn't very rewarding all in all, I got a feeling that I should do more or that I have resources for something more than that work (male civil engineer, former technician)*

Most of the interviewees continued working while studying in the university and used their evenings, weekends and holidays to studying. Those who worked while studying did not use the possibility of the benefits from the state for full-time students. Leaving work and studying with the help of study benefits would have led to a lowered standard of living, and these adults preferred to keep their life the same as it was before studies (e.g. continue paying the mortgage or own a car).

The study progress of those interviewed was relatively quick, they do not see studying in the university problematic, university studies are described to be challenging and interesting but not too difficult[5]. Some of the interviewees commented though that studying literature in a foreign language was "*hard work*". Preparing a master's thesis - which has been found to be problematic for many young students - was seen to have been interesting and even fun. All in all, while studying these adults used their time efficiently and in a planned way. The study progress can be seen to indicate that these adults were able to combine their existing knowledge into theoretical studies in the university. As one graduate put it: "*There was always something you already knew about the subject.*"

### 3.3 The 'construction' of a non-traditional student

When the interviewees told about their educational path they produced a picture of what it is to be an adult student in Finnish universities. Analysis of the educational life histories shows that adult students do not see themselves as ordinary students, instead, they describe themselves to have been 'different'. They regard the young ones to be the 'real' students whose role as a student and the position in the university are clear and non-problematic. The separate position of an adult student may, at least partly, be a result of the general research frame: I approached these adults as adult students who had studied in the university later than the mainstream of students. However, when talking about their educational paths, adults justify their studies in the university at

[5] This may be due to the fact that I interviewed those who had graduated.

adult age to many directions: not only inside the university but in the working life and in the family life as well. In family life adults have to create their identity as an adult university student not only in the relation with the spouse but with their children and parents, too.

*University*

All the interviewees regarded themselves to have been adult students (as an opposite of a young student). The most commonly mentioned detail about what separated them from ordinary students is that they did not take part in any student activities in their free time as family or work responsibilities were seen primary, and from this aspect their position was outside the 'traditional' student culture. The interviewees told episodes about their studies in which they took the position of a non-traditional student in the university, and showed the difference compared with the 'ordinary' (young) students.

> *There were quite a few students aged something like 40-50, we talked about the "grandpa club", we had this certain group, we spent time together there (male priest)*
>
> *We were all about the same age and the fourth was a young girl and we said that she was born old because she spent time with us (female educator)*

The adult student's relationship with younger students and the university staff was in most cases described as good and non-problematic. Only one interviewee had experienced age discrimination while being a student of economics.

*Work*

When one person of a working community starts studies in the university this seems to cause a certain imbalance in the work place and sometimes envy among the fellow workers. The use of working time of some of the interviewees was examined: the interviewees thought that great care was taken that they did not get any benefits or that they did not use their time at work to promote their 'personal' interest, the studies. Many interviewees comment that they did not or could not talk about their studies at work.

> *I didn't talk about it at work (female administrator)*
> *Not many people knew, I haven't really talked about my studies (female economist)*
> *I did it secretly, I didn't tell about it at work (female educationist)*
> *It's difficult, actually I had to study in secrecy (male civil engineer)*

One of the interviewees described the attitude of the workmates as follows:

*Maybe I should have been lying on the couch in the evenings having beer and watching TV, this they would have accepted, they did not accept my studies (female secretary, Master's Degree in Administration)*

The working communities do not seem to support studies in the university which in themselves are seen as an indicator of (or leading to) upward social mobility. If there was no envy (or hostility) in the attitude towards studying, the attitude was described to be indifferent even if most of the interviewees had one or some supporters at work.

*Family*

Many interviewees stressed that studying would not have been possible without the support from the family. Spouses and children are described to have been in cooperation in organizing the everyday life at home. Some interviewees did, however, point to conflicts with their spouses (here husbands) connected by the studying.

*He has supported me, but maybe my success somehow confused him, at some stage he felt it threatening (female educationist)*

*He didn't take it so well, he like just had to accept it (female administrator)*

It could also be the case that the adult student's adult child didn't approve the (old) mother to be studying. The adult student's parents might also have had some doubts about their adult child starting studies, but later, when the studies proceeded, parents seem to have been the ones giving the most valuable encouragement for the adult student.

*She (mother) really, really respected this (female economist)*
*Yes, my mother was very happy about my degree (female teacher)*

**3. 4 Was it worth it?**

The effects and the significance of studying in the university and gaining a university degree was estimated by the interviewees. They found both the studies (learning) and the degree (credential) significant on personal, social and financial levels. They take the point that studying has been significant both for the content of their work and - as an 'extra bonus' – most of them have achieved a higher salary level. All except three interviewees (who are all women) are now in a different job than before they started university studies and they have moved 'upwards' in their socio-economic status. Some interviewees mention though that if only estimated in material terms, they do not have enough time in working life to 'earn back' the investments they made in studies.

The interviewees described personal effects of their studies and their higher educational level. Improved self-esteem and a more confident grip on work and life in general were often mentioned in the interviews.

> *Feeling of being a civilized person (female MD)*
>
> *In a way it has improved my self-esteem, both personal and professional. It has a huge meaning like if you plan to do it or talk about doing it, it might feel difficult to do when you work and have a family, but when you really have done it, that is somehow connected with self-esteem. (female administrator)*

The significance of university studies and the degree taken at adult age can be summoned up by the words of interviewees:

> *Only after all these studies I realise all the possibilities in life. (female economist)*
>
> *I can think of no other way. Definitely it was the best and healthiest choice for me. (female economist)*
>
> *Huge meaning, and I see it having rich and good effects. (male priest)*
>
> *I feel in that way to be very lucky that my life is, if I didn't have this education, it would only be this wide* (=narrow) *and now it is this wide* (=broad). *(female nurse educator)*

When the interviewees talked about their university studies and degree, they took unanimously the view of education being of value. Those who haven't changed their position in working life, who still work in the same job as before their studies, also mention a raised job satisfaction, *"understanding things more widely and deeper"*, and they see themselves doing better in their jobs with help of the raised educational level.

## 4 CONCLUSION

The adultification of Finnish university students and examination of adult students' study positions suggests that there are various patterns for studying and gaining a university degree, even if in Finland there are no special programs or a special policy for including adults in higher education. Studying in the university at adult age shows how life courses - that before were described to be linear with clear phases of life - now can become more individually oriented life paths. For many students times of work and study take turns or take place simultaneously. This has led to changes in study patterns: the study time in university is not necessarily a clear transition or a phase of life

before work and family life, and many students today have multiple roles in society while they are studying.

When a university degree is studied at adult age the ideas of lifelong learning and learning society are made true in 'real life'. These adults have created a new pattern to study in the university. Before, in their youth, in a 'low' socioeconomic situation living far away from university towns, having no family with higher education, the barriers to enter university were too high. (Or more precisely the idea of going to university was irrelevant.) For these adults the time and the chance of university studies have come after having a family, after other (vocational) studies, after times of work. The educational paths of adult university students is long, but on the other hand, they can be seen as examples of individuals who have broken out of their expected 'low' educational career.

One of the main results in the studies of life course is that starting a new education at adult age is connected with a major transition in other areas of life like loss of work or divorce (e.g. Tian 1996). In the light of this study, the university studies were not related to such a transition, for example there was no unemployment or even a threat of losing work among those interviewed. This indicates that in the emergence of a learning society or a lifelong learning society new patterns of education, at least on the university level, have arisen. Gaining a university degree at adult age is not connected to the adult's socio-economic background in childhood (cultural capital) or success in the school on the basic level. Rather, it is possible to create an alternative educational path to study a university degree as a choice of life – be it seen as an individual choice or a result of the compulsive nature of lifelong learning society.

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